

MAKING MUCH OF

By Paul Washer

SIN

The center of the Gospel is the death of Christ. Christ died for sin. Therefore, there can be no Gospel proclamation apart from a biblical treatment of sin. This includes explaining the heinous nature of it and exposing men as sinners.

I am aware that the subject of sin is somewhat out of vogue even in some Evangelical circles; nevertheless, any honest consideration of Scripture as it relates to contemporary culture will demonstrate that there is still a need to “make much of sin.”

The need for speaking clearly about sin is acute since we live in a generation born in sin and captivated by it.¹ We are a people that drinks down iniquity like water,² and cannot discern our fallen condition anymore than a fish can know that it is wet. Because of this, we must endeavor to rediscover a biblical view of sin and the sinfulness of man. Our understanding of God and the Gospel depends upon it.

As stewards of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we do no service to men by making light of sin, skirting around the issue, or avoiding it altogether. Men only have one problem - They are under the wrath of God because of their sin.³ To deny this is to deny one of the most foundational doctrines of Christianity. It is not unloving to tell men that they are sinners, but it is the grossest form of immorality not to tell them! In fact, God declares that their blood will be on our hands if we do not warn them of their sin and the coming judgment.⁴ To seek to preach the Gospel without making sin an issue is like trying to heal the brokenness of a people superficially, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.⁵

The book of Romans is the closest thing we have to a systematic theology in the Scriptures. In this letter, the Apostle Paul is setting forth his doctrine before the church in Rome. He seeks to prepare them for his upcoming visit,

and hopes that they will join with him in his missionary endeavors in Spain.⁶ It is extremely important to note that the first three chapters of this letter, with the exception of a brief introduction, is dedicated to hamartology⁷ – the doctrine of sin. For three chapters, the apostle labors with all his intellect and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit with one great purpose – to prove the sinfulness of man and to condemn the entire world!

I have often heard Christians declare that God has not given us a ministry of condemnation and death, but of righteousness, reconciliation and life.⁸ This is very true, but this does not mean that we are not to speak much about sin, or use the Scriptures to bring men under the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding their sin. It is true that there is now no condemnation “in Christ Jesus”⁹, but there is nothing but condemnation apart from Him.¹⁰

The Scriptures tell us that the Law was not given as a means of salvation, but as an instrument for exposing both the vileness of sin – that sin would be utterly sinful,¹¹ and the sinfulness of man – that all the world might become accountable to God.¹² This ministry of the Law should continue to be an essential part of our Gospel proclamation. The “old” preachers called it the breaking up of fallow ground,¹³ turning over rocks, and pulling back curtains. They saw the need to hold men up to the mirror of God’s Law so that they might see their destitute condition and cry out for mercy. Of course, this is not to be done with a spirit of pride or arrogance, and we are not to handle people roughly. God has not called us to be a belligerent or offensive people, even though the truth we preach with all humility may be quite offensive.

The ministry of the Apostle Paul did not have condemnation as its goal, but there is a very real sense in which he labored to condemn men in

the hope that they might recognize their utter moral ruin, and turn to Christ in repentance and faith. In the book of Romans, Paul first sets out to prove the moral corruption of the entire world, its hostility toward God, and its absolute refusal to submit to the truth it knows.¹⁴ Then he turns his attention to the Jew, and proves that although uniquely blessed through the gift of special revelation, he is as guilty before God as the Gentile.¹⁵ Finally, he concludes his argument by presenting some of the most direct and offensive accusations found in Scripture against man.¹⁶ What is his purpose? He tells us in his closing arguments:

“That every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.”¹⁷

Like Jeremiah before him, Paul was called not only to “build and to plant”, but also to “pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow”¹⁸. He was, in his own words, “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God”¹⁹. Under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and through the Scriptures, Paul endeavored to end the hope of the pagan moralist, the religious Jew, and everyone in between. He wrote and preached to close the mouths of men so that they would never again boast in self-righteousness or make excuses for sin. He cut them off from every other hope so that they might turn to Christ alone.

Was the Apostle Paul merely an angry and bitter man with an axe to grind against humanity? No! He loved humanity to such an extent that his life was poured out like a drink offering on behalf of the Gentiles²⁰, and he even wished himself accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of his fellow Jew²¹. Paul preached against sin for the same reason that the physician works to diagnose his patient’s illness and is willing to tell him even the worst of news. It is a labor of love for the salvation of the hearer. Any other response by doctor or preacher would be loveless and immoral.

It may be appropriate at this moment to ask ourselves if our Gospel preaching has such a purpose. Do we love enough to teach truth, expose sin, and confront our hearers? Do we possess a biblical compassion that tells men the truth in hope that their hearts might be broken under the weight of their sin and they might

look to Christ alone? Are we willing to risk being misunderstood and maligned in order that truth might be told and men might be saved?

There seems to be a growing conviction even among Evangelicals that contemporary western man is already so psychologically fractured and burdened with guilt that we dare not press him further lest we crush him. Such a view fails to realize that there is a tremendous difference between a psychological fracture and biblical repentance leading to life. Modern man has become the feeble character that he is because he is self-absorbed and living in rebellion against God. He is loaded down with guilt because he is guilty. He needs God’s Word to expose his sin, and bring him to repentance. Only then will there be a biblical brokenness that leads to life.

God’s dealings with the nation of Israel provide us with wonderful examples of this truth. Through the prophet Isaiah, He describes Israel’s condition:

“The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is nothing sound in it. Only bruises, welts and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil.”²²

The nation of Israel was as fractured and frail as one could ever imagine, yet God dealt with them for their own good by pointing out their rebellion and calling them to repentance. He used many “hard words” against them²³, but each was necessary to expose their sin, and turn them from it.²⁴

Identifying a malady and explaining the seriousness of it is always the first step to a cure. A man who has no knowledge of his cancer will not seek the aid of medicine, and a man will not flee from a burning house unless he knows of a fire. To the same degree, a man will not seek salvation until he knows that he is thoroughly lost, and he will not flee to Christ until he knows that there is no other means of salvation. Men must be told of their sin before they will acknowledge it; they must be informed of the danger of it before they will flee from it; and they must be convinced that salvation is found in Christ alone before they will leave behind all their self-righteous hopes and run to Him.

Making much of sin is no longer a consider-

ation for most of the Evangelical community. There even seems to be a conscious effort to discourage such preaching as negative and destructive. We seem to balk at exposing the sinner's sin, and yet this is a primary ministry of the Holy Spirit:

"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged."²⁵

According to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has been sent into the world to convict men of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Bringing sin to light and pressing the sinner to repentance is one of His primary ministries. Should not we as ministers of the Gospel have the same goal? Should not our preaching reflect the same work? Is it possible to evangelize in the power of the Holy Spirit, while refusing to work with the Spirit in this essential ministry? Although the Holy Spirit is not dependent upon human instruments, God has ordained that men come to conviction of sin, repentance, and saving faith through preaching.²⁶ Yet how can the Spirit use our preaching if we are not willing to expose sin or call men to repentance? The Scriptures teach us that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God²⁷, but if God's ministers only reluctantly use the sword in convicting men of sin, will it not quench both the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit? We must not be afraid to follow the Spirit's example in dealing with sinners. If He deems it necessary to convict men of sin, we must join Him in this work. Those preachers and churches that have found a "better way," have no grounds for hoping that the Spirit of God is working among them to bring men to Christ.²⁸

Before we conclude, it is important to make one final note. The greatest reason for making much of sin is that it exalts the Gospel. The beauty of the stars cannot be seen in the midday sky because they are eclipsed by the light of the sun. However, when the sun is set and the sky becomes black as pitch, the stars are seen in the full force of their splendor. So it is with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Its true beauty can only be seen in the backdrop of man's sin. The darker man appears, the brighter the Gospel.

It seems that men never even notice the beauty of Christ or consider His worth until they see the heinous nature of their sin and them-

selves as absolutely destitute of merit. There are countless testimonies of Christians down through the ages who never once esteemed Christ until the day the Holy Spirit came and convicted them of sin, and righteousness, and judgment. It was only after they were engulfed in the unrelenting darkness of their own sin, that Christ appeared like the morning star and became precious to them.

It is striking that when true believers in Jesus Christ hear a sermon regarding man's depravity, they walk out of the church bursting with joy and filled with a new zeal to follow Christ. It is not because they take sin lightly or find some satisfaction in their former sinful state. Rather, they are filled with joy unspeakable, because in the greater darkness they saw more of Christ! How we rob men of a greater vision of God, because we will not give them a lower vision of themselves.

1 Psalm 51:5; 58:3

2 Job 15:16

3 John 3:36

4 Ezekiel 33:8

5 Jeremiah 6:14

6 Romans 15:23-24

7 Hamartology is derived from the Greek words hamartía meaning sin and logos meaning word or discourse. Hamartology is literally a discourse on sin.

8 This statement is based upon II Corinthians 3:7-9 and II Corinthians 5:17.

9 Romans 8:1

10 Romans 5:18

11 Romans 7:13

12 Romans 3:19

13 Jeremiah 4:3; Hosea 10:12

14 Romans 1:18-32

15 Romans 2:1-29

16 Romans 3:1-18

17 Romans 3:19

18 Jeremiah 1:10

19 II Corinthians 10:5

20 Philippians 2:17

21 Romans 9:3

22 Isaiah 1:5-6

23 Isaiah 1:4

24 Isaiah 1:18-19

25 John 16:8-11

26 I Corinthians 1:21

27 Ephesians 6:17

28 I owe this insight to pastor Jeff Noblit of Grace Life Church of Muscle Shoals, Alabama.